



Dark history of a happy city

The Charlottesville protest, ugly truths and some hope for very real change.

by ERICA JOHNSON | illustration by WES WATSON

Two years ago this month, white supremacists and counter-protesters clashed in the streets of Charlottesville. Heather Heyer, 32, died after an avowed racist deliberately plowed his car into the crowd. A State Police helicopter monitoring the protests crashed, killing Lt. H. Jay Cullen, 48, and Trooper-Pilot Berke M.M. Bates, 40.

The list of injured was long — and it included the city itself. Charlottesville, once dubbed the “happiest city in America,” was devastated.

In the wake of that hate and violence, people looked for answers. Some pointed fingers at outsiders. But others recognized a dark part of the region’s past, one deeply divided by race and wealth.

No one could have predicted what was to come after that August weekend. The revelation of the real Charlottesville became a call to action, unlike any the town’s citizenry had ever heard. We are now willing to confront a history that also defines the present — as ugly and pervasive as it is. There is hope. People are talking about change for the better.

I was relatively new in Charlottesville when the protests occurred. After 40 years working and living in Washington, D.C., I left a grueling schedule and downshifted into what I hoped would be a more pleasant existence in the Virginia foothills.

The area was not entirely foreign to me. My parents were born in nearby Keswick, where affluence and poverty were stark but did not clash, at least not loudly. My mother grew up in the servants’ quarters of Tall Oaks, a grand estate where her parents worked as domestics. Determined to finish high school, she walked daily to the main highway and caught a Greyhound bus into Charlottesville to Jefferson High School, the nearest high school for black students.

Shortly after my parents married in the early 1940s, they left their impoverished country lives for Norfolk. A Navy and shipbuilding city, it offered them a chance to do something other than clean homes or work on farms.

Still, Keswick maintained a presence in our lives, mostly as the destination of our summer vacations. I spent many happy August mornings on my grandparents’ back porch, making mud pies. After supper, the front porch became my perch to eavesdrop on the adults, who were drinking

whiskey and laughing about things I was too young to understand.

These cherished memories helped to drive my decision to relocate here. But the memories of a child rarely tell the full story.

What I didn’t know then was that people similar to the ones who stormed the University of Virginia campus chanting “Jews will not replace us” created an atmosphere of fear in the region, one my parents felt acutely on summer trips to Keswick. I didn’t know my father worried the car would break down with no gas station willing to help a black family, or that we would run into troublemakers looking, for no reason, to threaten or even harm a black family on a road trip.

That hateful weekend two years ago sent me on a quest to discover what I’d missed as a child. I attended forums at churches, listened in on conversations in shops and restaurants. I read the local newspapers, signed up for email lists, devoured the national press coverage.

What I learned is that some residents were outraged by what had occurred. How could this happen in our quiet, progressive town? I heard repeatedly. Who were all those outsiders and where did they come from? Many people failed to connect the deadly events to the hatred and inequity simmering throughout the nation. They forgot that the two rally organizers were hardly outsiders: They had graduated from the University of Virginia.

Not that Norfolk was free from Jim Crow. Norfolk was as segregated as any other American city, but it had an up-and-coming black middle class and a large military presence. The Charlottesville region, however, was about as conflicted as the person who shaped its identity. Thomas Jefferson, the third U.S. president, was both an advocate of freedom and the owner of more than 600 slaves.

The city is oversupplied with restaurants, yet 18 percent of our residents live with food insecurity, compared to 12 percent statewide. We boast world-class medical care, yet the infant mortality rate is nearly three times higher for people of color than for whites. The Charlottesville school district ranks among 20 districts with the largest black-white achievement gap. The social mobility rate for our poor residents is among the worst in the country.

Today U.Va., the university Jefferson founded, ranks among the top public universities and sees itself as smart and progressive. But its history says otherwise, as historians have documented. For example, Paul Barringer, medical faculty chairman from 1891 to 1895, later president of the faculty, made research into eugenics and white racial superiority his life’s work. Documentation from 1922 indicates he spoke to the Charlottesville chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, and a U.Va. student yearbook featured an illustration of a robed Klansman astride a horse with three similar images in the background.

In January 2018, Nikuyah Walker became Charlottesville’s first black female mayor. When asked that year what’s different today, she said: “What’s different in 2018 is that August 2017 happened.”

For me, Walker’s statement was a hopeful signal from a Charlottesville native who’s witnessed the worst possible outcomes for black citizens. And hard as they are, racial-justice conversations are taking place across the region now — at churches, nonprofits, community gatherings, board meetings, workshops.

Discussions about race are strong in my field, affordable housing. Taking action against the area’s growing housing disparities was already

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a priority. August 2017 pushed leaders even more to redress injustices. Nonprofits are holding racial equity training. A church collective is sponsoring “Conversations toward Reconciliation,” and several groups are holding workshops on “whiteness.”

Meanwhile, for the first time in decades, people are talking openly about the tearing down in 1964–65 of Vinegar Hill, the heart of Charlottesville’s black community. Like so many cities, our city is marked by egregious urban renewal projects that still haunt us. The black folks from Charlottesville I’ve run across who remember Vinegar Hill have neither forgotten nor forgiven the city’s action. But the history is finally coming out.

On the other side of town, James Ryan, U.Va.’s new president, publicly apologized, on behalf of the university, to the student body for not keeping them safe when white supremacists marched onto campus. Last year, the University of Virginia Press published *Charlottesville 2017: The Legacy of Race and Inequity*, a collection of essays by faculty sharing historical truths about the city’s and the university’s past and the authors’ struggle to make sense of August 2017.

Not a sector of the city was spared the effects of that weekend, including the region’s robust tourism. Charlottesville’s proximity to the Blue Ridge Mountains gives it an exquisite beauty. That, and all that has developed around it, attracts visitors from around the world. Tourism fell slightly in the immediate aftermath, even though experts agree measuring it can be challenging at best, given the related nuances. Now, from all indications, tourism is rising again. In May, the convention and visitors bureau launched its “More to C” campaign, embracing the community’s aspirations and dedication to social justice and racial equality.

My new home is certainly not the place I envisioned when I relocated in 2016. My perspective has changed altogether. Today, I’m here because I want to be among the folks who are showing real courage and fortitude in facing America’s painful past and present history of racial injustice and making some small contribution to reconciliation and healing. ■

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